
High Plains Horticulture: A History

by John F. Freeman

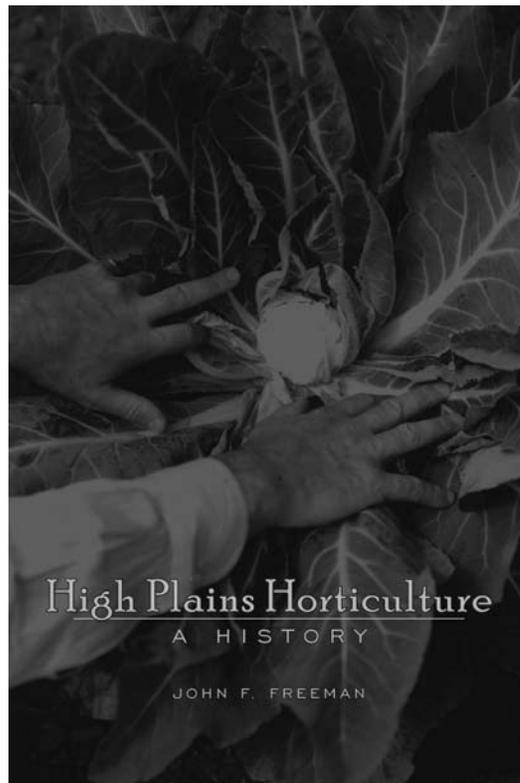
xiv + 270 pages, illustrations, map, notes, bibliography, index.
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High Plains Horticulture: A History provides insight into the post-settlement history of horticulture in the High Plains of western Kansas, Nebraska, and South Dakota and eastern Colorado and Wyoming. John Freeman views horticulture as a civilizing influence, and he carefully reviews its role in the settlement of the area. He discusses horticulture's role in providing food for farm families and, later, ornament for the homes of Denver, Cheyenne, and even small towns, including Bird City, Kansas. He traces the importance of researchers—especially Charles Bessey in Nebraska, Aven Nelson in Wyoming, and Niels Hansen in South Dakota—and their influence on the development of new horticultural crops adapted to the region. And he shows how settlement and irrigation changed the land and the food grown on it.

Freeman has done his research, and obviously spent considerable time in the musty pages of old government documents in many libraries in the region. This is a unique and focused work, a good book to read, that nevertheless leaves me with many questions and a few criticisms. His chapter on "Horticultural Beginnings" does not start early enough or look at the successes of horticulture by Native Americans. Corn, beans, squash, and many wild fruits are found in archeological remains in the regions studied, as demonstrated by Robert Hoard and William Banks in the volume they edited in 2006, *Kansas Archaeology*, and Raymond Wood in his 1998 *Archaeology on the Great Plains*. The trials, tribulations, and stories of native growers, including the historic growers at El Quartejeo pueblo in western Kansas, would have helped the early settlers' feeble attempts to garden. Although prairie turnips (*Pediomelum esculentum*) are mentioned by Freeman as a wild food that was being harvested as recently as 1905, I have observed that it is still harvested on the Lakota reservations in the region, and it is even available on the internet as a flour product for fry bread. These omissions demonstrate the repeated lack of interaction between native peoples and settlers that has resulted in a tremendous lost opportunity that continues today.

Freeman's book expands the discussion of horticulture in the region by detailing some of the history of both fruit and ornamental trees, especially the attempts to establish forests such as the Nebraska National Forest. While this history is interesting and deserves even further discussion, the lack of success in establishing forests in western Nebraska and Kansas is not adequately addressed. The role of windbreaks and trees as ornamentals in cities and towns is highlighted and has been perhaps the most successful horticultural development in the region.

Recent horticultural accomplishments in the region are noteworthy, especially the development of xeriscaping by the Denver



Water Department and the growth of farmers' markets and renewed local production. Freeman is somewhat dismissive of the latter, stating that part of the reason for this is "nostalgia for a simpler time of small, independent farms, when produce was grown with few or no artificial fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides" (p. 234).

Such a conclusion leads me to question why Freeman offers almost no discussion of the federal agricultural policies that promoted larger and larger farms, which in turn used more and more water, fertilizer, and pesticides. Surely these national policies have had a direct, negative impact on horticulture in the region. What percentage of produce eaten today in Hays or Fort Collins or Bird City comes from the region? How does that compare to one hundred years ago, or fifty years ago? These questions need to be asked not only in Freeman's book, but also to become part of an ongoing discussion of what we grow and eat on the High Plains and what policies we implement to support (or to oppose) horticulture. Perhaps Freeman's dismay at the new mission given to the Cheyenne Horticultural Field Station, which recently converted to a focus on native grass research, should have caused him to become concerned with the state and national agricultural policies and subsidies that have primarily promoted large-scale agriculture almost to the exclusion of horticulture in the region.

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